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SUBJECT: SCENESETTER FOR UNDER SECRETARY BURNS' FEBRUARY  
16-17 VISIT TO BEIRUT

Classified By: Ambassador Michele J. Sison for reasons 1.4(b)  
and (d).

**¶1. (C) SUMMARY:** Embassy Beirut warmly welcomes your February 16-17 visit to Lebanon. As the country emerges from a six-month struggle to form a new national unity government, your meetings with President Michel Sleiman, Prime Minister Saad Hariri, and Speaker of Parliament Nabih Berri will reinforce the message that the U.S. is committed to supporting Lebanon's state institutions and new government. Your possible meeting with UN Special Coordinator for Lebanon Michael Williams will illustrate U.S. commitment to the fulfillment of UN Security Council Resolutions 1559 and 1701.

A dinner with March 14 representatives will give you an opportunity to reaffirm our support for Lebanon's sovereignty, independence, and moderate political forces. Our support to the Lebanese Armed Forces (LAF) and the Internal Security Forces (ISF), along with our other robust U.S. assistance programs, aims to strengthen state institutions, promote economic growth, support education and build civil society.

**¶2. (C)** Your visit to Lebanon will show continued U.S. support for Lebanon's sovereignty and stability while underscoring the state's obligation to exert control over all of its territory. Your visit will also highlight the U.S. desire to gain a better understanding of the Lebanese perspective and role in securing a comprehensive and lasting peace in the region. President Sleiman and PM Hariri, in particular, will seek assurances that the U.S. remains committed to supporting Lebanon and that Middle East peace negotiations will take into account their concerns about Palestinian refugees resident in Lebanon. End Summary.

NEW UNITY GOVERNMENT BASED ON CONSENSUS

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**¶3. (C)** The new prime minister, Saad Hariri, was able to form a national unity government in December only after he granted the opposition key concessions following nearly six months of negotiations. Although the contentious cabinet negotiations weakened March 14 and strengthened those allied with Syria and Iran, most Lebanese leaders appear to be seeking a period of calm after years of tumult following former Prime Minister Rafiq Hariri's assassination and the withdrawal of Syrian forces from Lebanon. Your interlocutors will be keenly interested in U.S. engagements in the Arab world, with an emphasis on the U.S. relationship with Syria and our role in restarting Middle East peace negotiations. They will likely emphasize Lebanese opposition to settling Palestinian

refugees in Lebanon under any such deal.

KEY U.S. OBJECTIVES

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¶4. (C) Strengthening key Lebanese state institutions continues to be the primary U.S. objective in Lebanon. The U.S. has committed over \$600 million in security assistance (\$530 million in assistance to the LAF, \$86 million to the ISF) to the military and police since 2006 to help the GOL gradually extend its control over all Lebanese territory, including areas dominated by Hizballah. President Obama underscored this objective by emphasizing the importance of controlling arms smuggling into Lebanon during President Sleiman's mid-December visit to Washington. Your visit here offers an opportunity to reaffirm U.S. support for the various Lebanon-related UN Security Council resolutions (UNSCRs), especially 1559 and 1701, that call for extending the state's control over all its territory.

HARIRI GOES TO DAMASCUS

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¶5. (C) Prime Minister Saad Hariri, leader of Lebanon's Sunnis and heir to his assassinated father's political and business legacy, assumed his new role after a grueling negotiation with his political opponents. As the head of the primarily Sunni Future Movement, Hariri was a key leader of the March 14 coalition and an opponent of Syrian influence in Lebanon. After finally forming a national unity government in December, he visited Damascus to establish a relationship with Syrian President Bashar al-Assad as part of a regional

detente between Syria and Hariri's primary backer, Saudi Arabia. As part of this process, he also extended his hand to Syria's allies in Lebanon, including Hizballah and Christian opposition leader Michel Aoun. Hariri said he went to Damascus "seeking a new relationship, with a neighbor" and cast his December 19-20 visit as "a new form of achieving sovereignty and independence."

¶6. (C) According to the PM's advisors, Hariri "heard all the right things" from al-Assad, who sought a new paradigm based on economic cooperation rather than ideological conflict, on the model of Syria's blossoming relationship with Turkey. The PM said he was optimistic following the talks with al-Assad, although he did not expect that all GOL bilateral goals would be achieved. Hariri planned to launch an initiative to demarcate the Lebanese-Syrian shared border and said he had discussed with his Syrian interlocutors plans to construct a railway from Tripoli to Homs and to transfer gas from Turkey to Lebanon through Syria. Hariri advisors said the Syrian president sought to establish a "personal relationship" with the PM, and Hariri divulged to visiting Special Envoy Mitchell that, following the visit, he called al-Assad "every week."

¶7. (C) In your meeting with the him, Hariri will seek assurances of continued U.S. support for his country, and you will have the opportunity to urge him to strengthen and reform Lebanese state institutions that have been weakened by years of neglect, foreign occupation and internal strife. You will meet with Hariri two days after the fifth anniversary of his father's assassination and can assure him that U.S. support for Lebanese sovereignty and independence remains as strong now as in 2005. Despite our extensive security assistance -- including the provision of high-tech items such as the Raven UAV -- Hariri will likely outline his desire for a "Marshall Plan" for the LAF under which the U.S. would give more advanced equipment so that the LAF can be a credible force compared to Hizballah.

SLEIMAN SEEKS THE MIDDLE

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¶8. (C) President Sleiman, the former army commander elected as a consensus candidate in 2008, has committed himself to representing all Lebanese and to striving for unity among

Lebanon's sectarian groups. Although the Christian president's powers are limited by the constitution, Sleiman has emphasized that his absolute priority is maintaining stability in Lebanon by balancing internal and external political forces. Sleiman has also sought to return Lebanon to its place among the international community, as evidenced by his push for Lebanon's UN Security Council seat. During his December 14-15 visit to Washington, Sleiman publicly emphasized the need for continued U.S. assistance to Lebanon, complained of Israeli violations of Lebanese sovereignty, and called on the U.S. to ensure that any peace agreement between Israel and the Palestinians addresses Lebanese concerns on Palestinian refugees. Sleiman's advisors tell us that the message he heard in Washington on the danger that arms smuggling to Hizballah poses to Lebanon continues to resonate with him.

**¶9. (C)** It is widely assumed that Sleiman, as a consensus presidential candidate and former LAF commander, has the blessing of the Syrian regime. With visiting U.S. interlocutors, Sleiman often stresses Syria's good intentions towards the United States and the regime's seriousness in improving the bilateral U.S.-Syria relationship. We expect that Sleiman, who met al-Asad in Damascus in August 2009 and calls him regularly, will emphasize the challenges that Lebanon faces in implementing relevant UNSCRs and ask for U.S. commitment to constrain any escalation arising from security incidents along the Israeli border.

#### BERRI AS LEGISLATIVE POWERBROKER

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**¶10. (C)** Nabih Berri, first elected speaker of parliament under the Syrian occupation, has held the position for 18 years and exerts a strong measure of control over the institution. He also heads the Amal Party and partners with Hizballah to represent the Shia community in Lebanon. Since the formation of the new government, Berri has publicly advanced a series of reforms, including the abolition of sectarianism in the Lebanese political system. Berri has launched a media campaign against UNSCR 1559, which he sees as unfairly targeting Syria, and he is a vocal opponent of international resolutions aimed at Hizballah's arms, which he believes should be addressed through the National Dialogue process. Berri will likely lobby for U.S. pressure on Israel to restart peace negotiations with Syria.

#### INFORMAL BILATERAL RELATIONS CONTINUE WITH SYRIA

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**¶11. (C)** Although Lebanon and Syria exchanged ambassadors in October 2008, Syria maintains strong informal relations with key Lebanese politicians who push Syrian interests on the Lebanese political scene. Christian opposition leader Michel Aoun is expected to meet with President al-Asad in Damascus for the second time in three months on February 9, and other opposition figures frequently make the short trip to the Syrian capital. Even previously virulently anti-Syrian politicians have read the international winds as shifting in Syria's favor, following overtures by Western countries, including the United States, to Damascus. Since last August, former March 14 stalwart and Druze leader Walid Jumblatt has courted Damascus extensively for an invitation to visit. The continued existence of the Syrian-Lebanese Higher Council -- charged with overseeing economic and security treaties signed following the Taif agreement -- has also complicated GOL efforts to formalize bilateral ties.

#### STALLED BORDER DELINEATION

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**¶12. (C)** Although Hariri told visiting S/E Mitchell that he hoped to move forward with an initiative to demarcate the Lebanese-Syrian border, Lebanese interlocutors remain skeptical that progress will happen quickly. Hariri has told us that in preparation for initiating formal border talks

with Syria, which will begin in the north, he has asked the Lebanese border team to study the issues at hand. While Hariri supported demarcation, he said the goal was not "to build walls," but to "open a relationship," suggesting that he may hesitate to push al-Asad to halt weapons transfers to Hizballah across the porous boundary. The Palestinian military bases that straddle the border remain unaddressed despite Lebanon's 2006 National Dialogue decision to disarm Palestinians outside refugee camps.

GHAJAR: IMMINENT WITHDRAWAL UNLIKELY

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¶13. (C) Last year the GOL informally affirmed its support for the UN Interim Force in Lebanon (UNIFIL) proposal for an Israeli withdrawal from the occupied northern half of the village of Ghajar in the context of UNSCR 1701 implementation. However, as UNIFIL has continued discussing the logistics of such a withdrawal with Israel, the Israeli side has raised additional security, legal and humanitarian concerns, suggesting that an imminent withdrawal is unlikely. After UN Special Coordinator for Lebanon Michael Williams' recent consultations in Israel, he believed that Israel was "looking for something" from Lebanon before withdrawing from Ghajar. Williams, with whom you might meet, did not believe that the GOL had the political cover -- or inclination -- to negotiate over Ghajar, and we have also reiterated to the Israelis that a withdrawal should be expeditious and complete. We expect Williams will seek your assistance in pressuring the GOI to find a solution on Ghajar. He will also brief you on his meeting with Syrian Foreign Minister Walid Mouallem, currently scheduled for February 16, and his consultations with the new UNIFIL Force Commander, MGen Alberto Asarta Cuevas of Spain.

SEAT ON THE SECURITY COUNCIL

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¶14. (C) Lebanon was unanimously elected to a rotating two-year UN Security Council seat beginning in January 2010. President Sleiman fought personally for the seat, which he views as an opportunity to bolster his and Lebanon's international prestige and reconfirm its sovereignty. While Lebanon's vote will generally follow Arab League consensus, some issues, especially those related to Iran, Middle East peace, or Lebanon itself, could cause significant political friction in Beirut. While we understand Lebanon's delicate domestic environment, we want to stress that membership on the Council is an opportunity for the Lebanese to demonstrate responsible leadership.

RECENT SECURITY INCIDENTS

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¶15. (C) As the new government has begun its work, several security incidents have highlighted the inability of its security forces to operate in certain areas. In late December, the LAF was initially prevented by Hizballah from investigating the scene of a explosion at the Hamas headquarters in the Hizballah-controlled southern suburbs of Beirut. In early January, fighting between Palestinian factions inside the Ain al-Hilweh refugee camp also underscored the Lebanese security forces' limited ability to access the camps, which are a safehaven for extremist militant groups. More recently, on January 23 a UNIFIL foot patrol in southern Lebanon was harassed by an angry crowd of locals, in violation of UNSCR 1701. While none of these examples led to wider violence, the constant rhythm of security incidents has the potential to spiral out of control, especially if any aggression aimed at Israel results in casualties.

ETHIOPIAN AIRLINES CRASH

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¶16. (C) Your Lebanese interlocutors will likely express thanks for U.S. assistance in the aftermath of the January 25

crash of Ethiopian Airlines flight 409 off the coast of Beirut just minutes after takeoff. The tragic event magnified the limitations of the GOL to address emergency situations and highlighted its weakness in conducting search and rescue operations. At the request of PM Hariri, the U.S. mobilized resources to provide the destroyer USS Ramage, a contingent NAVCENT dive team, and technical expertise from the National Transportation and Safety Board and the Federal Aviation Administration to assist in the ongoing investigation. A second U.S. Navy ship, the USNS Grapple, is currently en route to Beirut and will remain until a commercial salvage ship arrives on or about February 11. Our immediate and ongoing support to GOL requests for assistance allowed us to provide real-time training to the LAF and exhibited goodwill in a time of national crisis.

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